A Far Better Way
I Corinthians 12:31-13:13
January 30, 1977

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

St. Paul suffers from a bad press sometimes. I don't suppose any reader of the Bible has not agonized over the intricacies of his thought and wondered whether all this complexity, all this tedium, is really necessary or even important. I was delighted to find a paragraph in a new book on Paul's Epistles which confirmed my suspicions. John Morris, a charming Englishman, writes;

> "Paul had for me a lack of fascination all his own. The seemingly endless passages of closely reasoned argument concerned with issues such as circumcision which are without relevance to our time; the apparent egotism; the censoriousness, relieved only by odd prose poems of great lyrical beauty sparkling like diamonds in a mountain of sludge - Paul's Epistles just weren't for me...I was a Jesus man, straight down the line. And I possibly bore a subconscious grudge against Paul who seems to have been the Galilean carpenter's fanatical stage manager - transforming a way of life so unfettered as a soaring bird into an ordered, organized and juiceless religion. I wonder if the old Jewish tentmaker will ever forgive me?" (Epistles to the Apostle, p.7).

If you've ever struggled with Paul on Law in Romans, for instance, you know exactly what that means. There is another side to Paul, however. In the thirteenth chapter of his First Letter to the Church at Corinth we catch a glimpse of the heart of the Apostle - in a piece of literature which itself soars like majestic poetry. Better to start here with Paul, rather than with the intricate arguments about grace and law and freedom.

In any event, I Corinthians 13 is, by itself, magnificent literature. Its subject is love: not love in the abstract: not the particular kind of love husbands and wives have for each other; not the love of good friends, or brothers, sisters, parents. Paul chose the Greek word agape - divine love, which the older translators rendered "charity". What Paul did was to take a very good Greek word and pour into that word the new experience of God's love which was available in Jesus Christ. The subject of this chapter is the love which God revealed in Christ - the love which now is the foundation for the new life to be lived by those who believe.

The chapter divides naturally into three sections. In the first, verses 1 through 3, Paul defines the essential character of love. The most eloquent gift of speech sounds like the harsh clang of a cymbal without love. The most profound prophecy, the deepest faith is worthless if it is not seasoned by this love. Even generous philanthropy and commendable self-sacrifice are meaningless, if they are not colored by this agape love.

The second section describes love in words which are unforgettable. This love, Paul says, is patient, kind, envying no one: it doesn't boast, isn't conceited or rude, it doesn't have a thin skin, taking offense at every slight and minor insult. This love doesn't enjoy the moral lapses of others, looking down its pious nose in arrogant self-righteousness. In fact, this is a love that cheers when truth and goodness and mercy prevail.

The third section announces the permanence of this love. It endures: it will stand when all else has fallen. "The older I get, the more I understand that," Paul said. As a child, love was a feeling for me, an emotion. But now I see it as God's basic attitude toward us and the one reality that rises above all else. I see it

now, partially, and one day I'm going to see it clearly, face to face. There are three eternal realities which never change from age to age: faith, hope and love. "But the greatest of them all is love."

It is a remarkable piece of literature - one that wears extremely well.

But even more remarkable to me is the fact that it was written to address a basic problem with religious people - pride which finds in piety a rich new reservoir of possibilities. Sometimes it seems as if religion is the greatest gift we can give to a swollen ego. Paul must have despaired of it. Under the old way it was the legalistic approach of Judaism. A person's goodness could be measured on the basis of how many laws were obeyed and how many pious acts performed. The system invited comparison with others and as soon as a person uses other people as a moral yardstick - he or she will find someone to be better than - thus a reason to feel good - then smug - then arrogant. But that was the old way. In Jesus Christ all that was gone: God's love for all had been demonstrated and the Christian life became the way to live in grateful freedom without worrying about all that. That's where Paul was. But here came the Corinthians, sounding as if nothing had really changed, arguing the same issues, but with a new vocabulary. They were enthusiastic Christians, as new converts always seem to be. The teachers among them thought that they had the inside track. Those who prophesied thought that the Kingdom depended on them. Some appeared to have a gift for healing and were convinced that it warranted first place among their peers. Out on the fringe of their fellowship some were speaking in tongues and then claiming that they were the real Christians and all the rest were second class. And if you know anything at all about the Church - and Church people - you know how contemporary that is. There is something about religion that brings out not only the best, but also the worst in us. And we Christians are least attractive when we are so positive of the righteous of our cause, our position, that we - in effect - excommunicate everyone else. Paul must have despaired of it.

Gently, artistically, he explained that the intent of Jesus Christ was to stimulate a new kind of human community in which each person would be valued and in which there would be parity among those who had different gifts. Taking his time to go into sometimes very earthy detail, he told them that they were like a body - a body with all its interdependent parts. Each depends on all the others. No one part is worth anything by itself. When one suffers, all suffer. If one flourishes, all enjoy it. That is what Jesus Christ intended for His people in their experience - but also as a shining example to the rest of the world of the way God wants human life to be lived. That's in the prior chapter - and it is that argument which is the preface to Paul's Hymn of Love. "And now," he wrote, "I will show you the best way of all."

The late Reinhold Niebuhr once wrote, "Basically, love means that life has no meaning except in terms of responsibility: responsibility toward our family, toward our nation, toward our civilization and, now, by the pressures of history, toward the universe of mankind which includes our enemies." (Justice and Mercy, p.35).

Niebuhr, one of the great Christian thinkers of our age, insisted on applying love to the whole of life including those complex areas such as justice and peace. Love, for the Christian, is not an emotion, not a good feeling. Rather it is a way of living life in all its ambiguity. "When we talk about love," Niebuhr used to teach, "we must be mature to avoid being sentimental." And he proposed it - as Paul did - as a better way to live life - real life - life fully in the world, beginning with the most immediate and intimate context.

We do a lot of unkind and hurtful things to one another in marriage - within our family circles. Sometimes we do them in the name of love. Colin Morris, the Englishman I quoted earlier, has written a little volume called Epistles to the Apostle, in which he proposes some of the letters early Christians might have written to Paul. The one on our text for this morning is particularly good. Let me share it with you.

> "My dear Paul: I was in church the other week when you gave us your exposition of the nature of true love - the love of Christ. Frankly, it hit me dead-center.
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> "I really thought I loved someone very deeply before you exposed my feelings for what they really were - sheer egotism and selfishness. I have been unwilling, or, more likely, afraid to allow the one I love to be herself for fear she would desert me. Far from being good-mannered and forbearing, our relationship has been one never-ending brawl with displays of temper, jealousy, and moodiness on my part. I thought that my bouts of fury were proof of the intensity of my love, but in fact I now see that they were devices to bind her to me. I was prepared to make any sacrifice for her except the one which really mattered, willingness to trust myself to her without any guarantees or safeguards. I was always wanting reactions to prove that my love was returned. I constantly put her to the test. I just didn't see that what I was demanding could only be given to me freely or not at all. In the name of my so-called love I have committed all kinds of sins: pride, envy, ill-temper, suspicion, and lust. Eventually, she could take no more and has gone - where, I have no idea."

Love, a far better way, is the only magic that will hold a marriage - a family together: love as Paul, not Hollywood, certainly not Hugh Heffner, defines it: love that by its nature is patient, kind, not possessive, not touchy...Families could do worse than read Paul on love every day!

Niebuhr proposed that love means responsibility toward our nation, our civilization and to the whole universe of humanity. I'm never sure that we take that at all seriously. Under the guise of keeping religion and politics separate, I suppose, we refuse even to consider that the way of Jesus Christ might have something to say about life in society, life even among nations. I can't remember the quote exactly but I think it was Clemenceau who derided Woodrow Wilson after World War I for "sounding like Jesus Christ". That is to say, Christianity, in the opinion of the hard-headed realist, has nothing to do with the harsh realities of life, like establishing the peace at the end of a war. Wilson, it was thought, was too soft, too idealistic, too naive, too trusting, too forgiving, which, by innuendo, is how Christianity might be described. Germany should be punished; its people made to pay; that's life; you don't forgive a nation that started a war. The succeeding two decades of history indicate the terrible wrongness of what politicians and diplomats called realism.

Christianity suffers from too much individualism. People seem willing enough to accept, at least in theory, the morality of Jesus as somewhat of a standard for individual life. But real resistance sets in when someone proposes that it might be equally valid for a whole nation - or even between nations. Even the theologians aren't sure about that.

Back in 1967 the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church adopted a new Confession of Faith which included the following phrase: "The Church, in its own

life, is called to practice the forgiveness of enemies and to commend to the nations as practical politics the search for cooperation and peace. This requires the pursuit of fresh and responsible relations across every line of conflict, even at risk to national security, to reduce areas of strife and to broaden international understanding." Well, no one who was a Presbyterian minister will forget what it was like for several weeks after that hit the papers. You would have thought the General Assembly had canonized Marx and elected Brezhnev Moderator. All that happened was that the Church had proposed seriously that there might be a better way to achieve peace - that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has some relevance between nations. But people reacted strenuously and said, in effect, that Christianity was too soft, too naive, too utopian to be taken seriously at that level.

Last week, Dr. Roger Shinn, Professor of Social Ethics at Union Tehological Seminary, addressed the Ohio Pastors' Conference at Veterans' Memorial. His topic had to do with the changing life styles which are emerging - and in some instances being forced on us by scarcity. It was an unhappy coincidence that Ohio was in the middle of an energy disaster, even as he spoke, although it did give him an immediate and dramatic illustration. He recited all the data which is familiar by now to all of us; the fact that we are running out of natural gas and petroleum, and that the crisis will be with us even after we weather this particular emergency: the fact that in tropical, non-technological cultures the investment of one calorie of energy in agriculture produces twenty calories in food stuffs, but that in our culture - with tractors and combines and corn fed beef and packaging and precooking and freezing it takes an investment of nine calories of energy in agriculture to produce just one calorie in the form of food; and by anybody's mathematics, even mine, it's apparent that that can't go on forever. And he recited the statistics of terror about who has the bomb and how many and who's likely to get it next - a not terribly comforting prospect.

And then he called our attention to a fact that I found intensely interesting: three American economists, in three separate recent books, have argued that the one and only hope for the future of the human race - is not another economic theory, not another political system - but implementation in the public sphere of the principles contained in - of all things - Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Now these are not soft-headed theologians; they are not sheltered, pampered and therefore naive preachers. These men deal with production, profit and loss, GNP, Balance of Payments: and they have concluded that the way of love is the only way left. One of them, Kenneth Boulding, observes that when all is said and done we have no alternative but to love our enemies. Perhaps that is what it will take: perhaps the truth of the Gospel will be heard and seen as a far better way when the economists point us to it. But how sad - we should have known it all along.

This has been an important week. There are many of us - perhaps most of us - who were raised on the milk of American invincibility. Other countries might stumble and fall, but not ours. Other cultures might be cold and hungry and dark but not here. We have something called abundance - and there is no end to it. Well, this week changed all that and brought me, at least, to a realization which I should have confronted long ago; namely, that there is a limit - perhaps even an end to abundance.

We'll weather this crisis. And I trust that we'll weather it with a maximum of good will because we know a little bit about love. But beyond the immediacy of the energy crisis the ultimate survivability of our culture - or at least the abundant way of life - appears now in a new light. Governor Rhodes has asked for our prayers that our State might endure this emergency. I endorse that. But my deeper prayer is that the way of Jesus Christ - the way of love - might be taken seriously across our land. And that it might begin here among us.

St. Paul said it was the best way of all. It may be the only way. Amen.